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From Faltering Industrial Plant To Experimental Workshop Laboratory

Herbert Rusalem, Ed. D., and Harold Richterman

ALMOST ALL OF AMERICAN REHABILITATION is concerned with providing assistance to disabled individuals, but SRS-funded Project RD-2472-S was different. It aimed at rehabilitating an ailing business enterprise, leading to its conversion into a demonstration workshop laboratory which now is having an important impact upon the rehabilitation of blind persons.

When the Modglin-Maid Corp. of Hazelhurst, Miss., came to the attention of National Industries for the Blind (NIB) in 1966, it was a sick industrial plant. Engaged in the highly competitive plastics business, the firm had allowed equipment obsolescence to reduce its effectiveness. Its machines were inefficient, its sales were faltering, its personnel had low morale, and its products were unattractive to wholesale buyers in the market place. An initial examination of the Modglin-Maid books revealed that, without an infusion of managerial acumen and a new sense of purpose, the future of the firm would be doubtful, at best. The symptoms were clear; the rehabilitation plan was not.

In the middle and late 1960's, National Industries for the Blind, a voluntary, nonprofit national organization created in 1935 to administer certain sections of the Wagner-O'Day Act, had become aware of a widespread need for an experimental workshop laboratory. In serving as the coordinating agency for government purchases of blind-made products for more than 70 workshops, NIB had developed into much more than a negotiating agent and a clearinghouse for government-purchase information. In addition to these traditional functions, NIB had established a strong technical assistance resource, a rack sales effort, and a growing rehabilitation program, all designed to assist workshops serving blind persons to improve their services to blind and multihandicapped blind persons.

In the course of offering this expanded program, NIB began to perceive a need for at least one facility in the United States which could accommodate experiments with innovative workshop approaches, testing new products, processes, and rehabilitation techniques under realistic but controlled conditions. In the past, NIB had had some success in this area through the use of selected associated workshops as sites for experimental activities. However, these workshops, operating under day-to-day productive pressures and having unalterable local client service priorities, lacked the needed resources and adaptability to perform this service in the manner desired. Understandably, their first responsibility was to the local blind client. In recognizing the differentiated role that associated workshops could play in the development of new products, new processes, and new rehabilitation procedures, NIB and its associated agencies felt that other development arrangements had to be explored, especially in view of the fact that nationwide technological changes and sharpened industrial competition for contracts were requiring workshops to become more efficient and creative.

After extensive study and discussion, NIB purchased the assets and goodwill of the Modglin-Maid Corporation and set about converting it into a sheltered workshop that could serve as an experimental laboratory. With the assistance of SRS, it took the following steps to implement the conversion:

- Revision of personnel policies so that, henceforth, blind and multihandicapped blind persons would be given preference in all new hirings.
- Adoption of new plant procedures which combined the original industrial emphasis of Modglin-Maid with a rehabilitation outlook.
- Introduction of a rehabilitation staff into the plant to complement existing industrial supervisory and administrative personnel. This included the appointment of an experienced rehabilitation worker as director.
- Employment of development personnel to speed the conversion process. Among these personnel were administrators, an engineering draftsman, and a machinist. High-level engineering consultation was arranged on a per diem basis.
- Existing industrial personnel at Modglin-Maid were trained to assume meaningful roles in the rehabilitation of blind persons.
- The development of an agreement with the State VRD in Mississippi through which blind residents of that State could use the new facilities.
- Gradual replacement of sighted workers by blind clients as normal turnover occurred.
- The installation of adapted equipment and re-engineered jobs that allowed blind and multihandicapped blind clients to function successfully in almost all productive areas in the plant.
- Evolution of a sequential series of rehabilitation experience through which blind clients can be eval-

Above is the Modglin-Maid plant in Hazlehurst, Miss. Below, a blind person operates an automatic clothesline hanking machine and pneumatic sleeving fixture.

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uated, trained, and placed in accordance with their interests and capabilities.

- Establishment of a program through which components of products produced at other NIB-associated workshops are manufactured for such workshops by blind persons at Modglin-Maid, thus not only making for a truly "blind-made" finished product, but also providing new sources for jobs for blind persons at Modglin-Maid and at the same time solving the problems of specifications and delivery delays and the other problems inherent in buying in overly competitive markets which are faced by the workshops.
- The development of long-range plans and priorities designed to make the Modglin-Maid plant a true demonstration laboratory for workshops for the blind throughout the United States.

Although there was no known precedent for the conversion of an existing industrial plant into a demonstration sheltered workshop laboratory, the NIB team did not feel deterred by the challenge. On the contrary, the combined NIB industrial and rehabilitation staff freely innovated and improvised procedures that in a period of 3 years resulted in the emergence of a new facility that met the standards of an effective workshop for the blind and, yet, provided controlled testing conditions for new products, industrial processes, management methods, and rehabilitation procedures. Among the accomplishments noted during the project period were:

(1) In conjunction with project activities, Modglin-Maid served 126 different blind and multihandicapped blind workers. Prior to the project, the plant had served none.

(2) At the time of report, 55 different blind and multihandicapped blind persons were actively engaged in the process of receiving service.

(3) A ratio of 75 percent blind to 25 percent nonblind workers had been achieved, permitting the laboratory to become eligible for participation in government-use contracts authorized under the provisions of the Wagner-O'Day Act.

(4) A number of the nonblind persons in the plant's labor force were sighted individuals who were disabled in other respects and who, in many cases, were deriving rehabilitation benefits.

(5) Rehabilitation agencies for the blind throughout the South, but especially in Mississippi and nearby States, were referring selected clients to the new facility to benefit from the unique rehabilitation resources available there. Many of these clients were so severely limited that they had not made constructive use of the rehabilitation services available in their own communities.

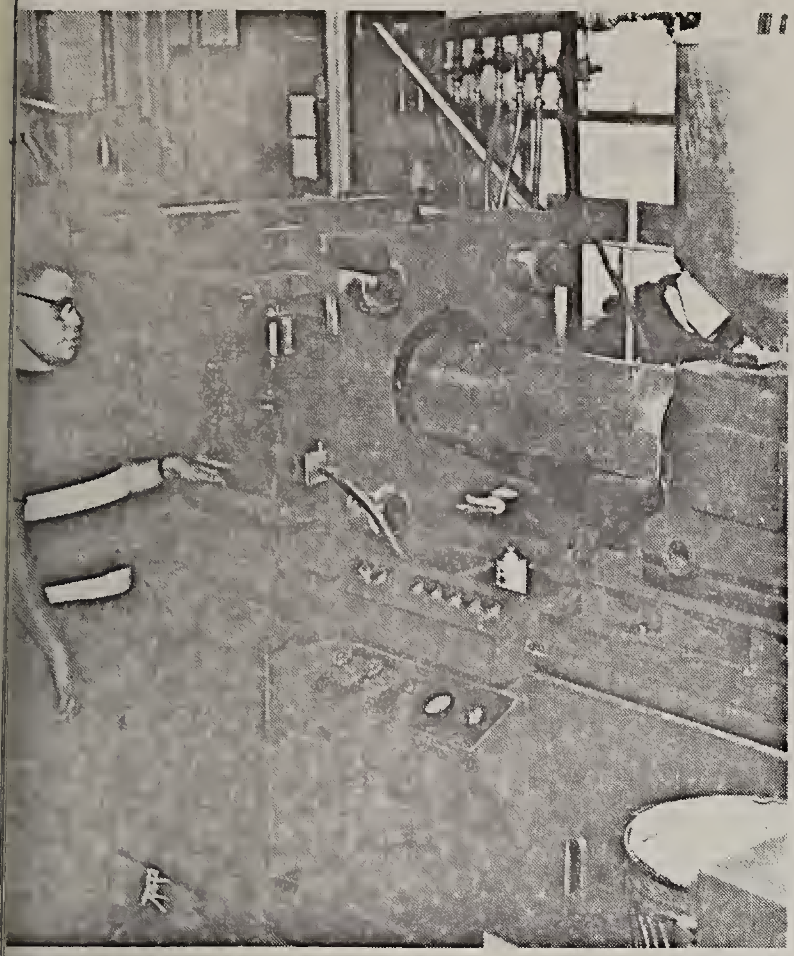
(6) More than 300 rehabilitation workers had traveled to Hazlehurst to observe the workshop demonstration laboratory and to take away with them ideas and concepts that might be applied to their own local situations.

(7) Numbers of new workshop products pioneered initially by the NIB Engineering Laboratory maintained in St. Louis, Missouri, had been tested under actual workshop conditions at Modglin-Maid. As new products "proved out" in these two laboratories, they now are enriching local training and employment opportunities for blind and multihandicapped blind persons. Among the products successfully pioneered by the two laboratories and other NIB-associated workshops were: fly swatters, plastic dustpans, thermal net plastics, feather dusters, eyeglass cases, equipment belts, plastic brush handles, whisk brooms, toy brooms, venetian blind cleaners, disposables (i.e., disposable washcloths, sterilized wrappers for hospital use, etc.), wooden clothespins, and brush type brooms. In addition, the two laboratories made a substantial contribution to the NIB ballpoint pen project, particularly in relation to developing adapted equipment and procedures that now enable blind persons with very limited capacities to engage in productive activities under sheltered conditions.

(8) The Modglin-Maid Demonstration Workshop Laboratory pioneered in opening new industrial occupations for blind and multihandicapped blind clients through demonstrating that such jobs could be performed under rigorous industrial conditions. Among these occupations were: spot welder, waxer, clothesline winder, sealer, driller, dust mop bagger, plastics fabricator, hula skirt roller, plater, glue machine operator, wire framer, hinge wirer, press clearer, sleeving machine operator, and painter. Each of these occupations was found to have the potential for becoming an important source of employment for qualified blind individuals.

(9) With the aid of grants received from the Mississippi Division for the Blind and Regional and National RSA offices, the Modglin-Maid Laboratory added more than 25,000 square feet of space to its original physical plant. This enabled the laboratory to expand and extend both its production and rehabilitation activities.

(10) The laboratory, in cooperation with the Mississippi Division for the Blind, demonstrated new



blind person operates a plastic injection molding machine at produces plastic caps used on broom handles.

atterns of cooperation between State agency and oluntary agency staff members, evolving proceures through which both groups could work toether on the same rehabilitation team at the same ehabilitation site.

Rehabilitation evaluations conducted on the 126 ndividuals served by the laboratory during the 3-ear project suggest that over one-third of this seerely limited client group has the potential for ntry in competitive employment and that another 0 percent can be expected to function satisfactorily nder sheltered workshop conditions. Members of ne remainder either had not yet been fully evaluted when the project terminated or were considered nore suitable for other types of service, such as paricipation in a work activities center or a mental ealth program. To achieve these vocational expecations, many of the 126 clients needed multifaceted nterdisciplinary rehabilitation programs in which ocational services were supplemented by assistance vith housing, personal counseling, family casework, ecreation, transportation, and other services. With he help of State and local rehabilitation agencies, Iodglin-Maid demonstrated that seriously limited lind and multihandicapped blind persons could, indeed, benefit from comprehensive programing in a workshop setting which contained strong engineering, product design, rehabilitation, and management resources.

As indicated earlier, the Modglin-Maid Laboratory field-tested a variety of products, many of which are currently in production at NIB-associated workshops. Beyond this service, however, the new facility provided technical assistance to 12 workshops in the local design and installation of assembly fixtures, the modification of production equipment, and the development of assembly line procedures. Within this context, the laboratory installed important modifications in such jobs as spot welder, waxer assembler and slicer, punch press operator, injection molder, clothesline winder, L-bar sealer, glue machine operator, plastic racker, straw counter and bagger, and mop assembler, which made it possible for severely disabled blind persons to overcome visual and other losses and to do these jobs in a satisfactory manner.

At the termination of the project, the laboratory became a permanent part of the NIB service program for local workshops for the blind. Since then, its facilities and services have continued to expand. As for the future, tentative plans for converting the demonstration laboratory into a model workshop are awaiting more favorable economic and funding conditions. This model facility will break new ground in the design and operation of sheltered workshop facilities, both for blind persons and for other handicapped client groups. Thus, one phase of development was completed in the project; others will follow. In time, Modglin-Maid may become a truly national center for the creation of new workshop-based rehabilitation service, the evolution of new production, management and rehabilitation techniques, and a facility upon which other workshops everywhere can model their programs. The project experience led to the following conclusions:

(1) With proper planning and administrative controls, it is not only possible, but desirable, in some circumstances, to purchase an ongoing industrial enterprise and convert it into a sheltered workshop. This is especially true when the industrial firm offers a new and promising product line, is relatively solvent, has a pool of skilled and experienced supervisory and technical personnel who can be trained to serve handicapped persons, has appropriate physical facilities, and is located in a community which welcomes the conversion. Under the best of condi-

tions, however, the conversion will require extensive technical assistance from a national organization such as NIB, in such areas as engineering, administration, production, marketing, and rehabilitation.

(2) Combined with rehabilitation know-how, engineering talent can open vast new areas of employment and production for very limited blind and multihandicapped blind persons in a sheltered workshop setting.

(3) Despite a faltering past, an industrial plant that has been converted into a sheltered workshop can operate economically and compete for contracts and products in the open market.

(4) A demonstration workshop laboratory can play a vital function in upgrading current workshop practices and opening new areas of employment, production, and rehabilitation. Essential to this process is a coordinated and scientific new product development service that takes automation and other technological advances into account in bringing new processes within the vocational orbit of severely disabled individuals.

(5) Through providing a model for other workshops, a demonstration laboratory can stimulate widespread movement toward the elevation of workshop performance standards and toward improved levels of rehabilitation services.

In accordance with project recommendations, NIB has retained and even expanded its demonstration workshop laboratory. The day is approaching when this facility will become a model workshop that has the capacity to innovate workshop and rehabilitation practices that go far beyond the sheltered workshop as we know it today. Preparations are already underway by NIB's Research Department for this significant rehabilitation development.

Program Notes

(Continued from page 12.)

Inmates at Attica Prison Develop Speaker's Program

• Prisoners at Attica State Prison, Attica, N.Y., who are participating in an SRS-funded research and demonstration project, are inviting legislators, community action workers, job placement workers, and academicians to speak to them. The program was initiated by the inmates, and it has yielded many tangible as well as intangible benefits.

On one occasion, for example, a job placement representative from a Buffalo program spoke of job possibilities for ex-convicts and parolees. To the inmates surprise he stated that finding jobs for them was not a problem; the problem was in how the former inmate adjusted to the situation. In subsequent group counseling sessions, the inmates discussed the speaker's points rather thoroughly. From the talk and their group session, many of the inmates developed insights into their personal responsibilities.

The speaker's program is run by the inmates and staff advisors who have formed a committee to develop suggested programs to be approved by the Warden. Once approval is gained, the committee drafts a letter of invitation. The inmates themselves serve as hosts and M.C. the actual event. The usual format consists of a prepared speech by the invited official, followed by a question and answer period.

But, according to project staff, the benefit has not been all one way. They tell how many of the participating speakers have themselves left the prison with a much better understanding of the prison, the inmates, and the prison program.

SWEAT Guides Students Toward Careers in MR

• The Student Work Experience And Training program (dubbed SWEAT) at Seaside Regional Center, Waterford, Conn., in the summer of 1970, accomplished what it was meant to do. Of the seven college students who took part in the 11-week summer program that is designed to introduce these potential professional workers to the field of mental retardation, five have definitely decided upon a career in the field. One of the two remaining students will probably enter the work, while the seventh still remains undecided.

The RSA-funded program is open to both high school and college students. From it the student receives, in addition to a stipend, orientation to the program, training, work experience. The institution participating in SWEAT programs benefits by extra manpower and expanded public support.

Training Leads to Employment For Nearly 2,000 Clients

• A statistical report covering RSA-supported training services grants for fiscal year 1970 revealed that 1,688 persons were placed into competitive employment as a result of job skill training. In addition, 155 clients were placed in sheltered employment. Close to 4,000 persons entered the programs during the year, and, at year's end, a little over 2,000 remained in the programs for further training.

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